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Editors' Page

A Gift of Laughter and a Sense the World Is Mad

Ken Donelson

There's a lot of scary stuff out there. Newspapers and TV bombard us with everything that's gone wrong, and without Father Cronkite to hold our hands, we're more afraid of things that go bump in the night. Northern Ireland. Lebanon. Drought. What's next? Gun control and the right to kill?

We need those wonderful people who make us laugh and forget for a bit the insanity that lurks out there, the Woody Allens and Richard Pryors and Miss Piggys. Maybe we even need those deadly serious people who provide inadvertent comic relief and remind us of the madness that abounds, the Jerry Falwells and Phyllis Schlaflys and James G. Watts.

We'd like some belly laughs, but anything that brings a chuckle is welcome. We find irony in a headline, "Teacher Shortage Due Soon, Say Experts," after reading the day before, "One of Three Teachers to Be Laid Off." We may be frightened by the actions of Alexander Haig and still find humor in his struggle to master a foreign language, English. We've learned to laugh at invasions of "Human Resources Counselors" and their ilk with all their pretentious, jargon-ridden advice, e.g., "The teacher exercises skill in reducing pupil *impulsivity* by such *arousal-reducing* techniques as . . ." (italics mine).

So to stay sane and human, we read amusingly literate mysteries like Amanda Cross' *Death in a Tenured Position* and Edmund Crispin's *Swan Song*. We read Jane Austen's *Love and Freindship*, Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, Thomas Love Peacock's *Crotchet Castle*, Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe*, and anything by E.B. White or P.G. Wodehouse or Stephen Leacock or S.J. Perelman. We watch W.C. Fields and Jean Arthur and Marie Dressler and Alistair Sim on the late show and sit up to the wee hours to catch reruns of *Bringing Up Baby*, *To Be or Not to Be*, *Talk of the Town*, *The Producers*, and *I'm All Right, Jack*. We read "Miss Peach," "Hagar the Horrible," "Herman," "Drabble," and especially "Mary Worth" to get our daily dose of the ludicrous. We treasure our collection of "Pogo" books. We collect old-radio tapes of giants like "Vic and Sade," "Fred Allen," and "Bob and Ray." We watch "Rumpole" and "Monty Python." We read Paul Dickson's *The Official Rules* for its wit and accuracy. We watch David Hartman's morning battles with the news. We find creativity in kids' spelling. We read Chrysler ads. We follow the progress of state legislatures and the Chicago Cubs.

And if we have our wits, we want our kids to laugh. They have enough problems without being saddled with humorless English teachers. English is one of the humanities which implies being humane, and that is in part to cry, in part to laugh. I have no faith in either "yuk-a-minute" teachers or teachers who can't laugh. We need teachers with a sense of humor and a sense of the ironic, the kind of person Rafael Sabatini described in opening his best book, *Scaramouche*, "He was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad." We need more people like that. We may not deserve them, but Lordy, how we do need them. So do kids.

This issue provides you with people who have that gift and that sense and do something about it in classrooms. Enjoy. We did. So will you.

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